

# The quest for the good life:

By **JON ALTMAN**  
Emeritus Professor  
Australian National University



**IN February I went to Maningrida to investigate the perspectives of the Kuninjku people with whom I have worked for a long time about what constitutes 'the good life' -- whether they have it in today's precarious world, or not; whether they have ever had 'the good life'; and whether they thought that it is something that they might achieve, if not today, in the future. This research was part of an international comparative project on moral economies sponsored by the United Kingdom Economic and Social Research Council.**

It was the middle of the wet season and Maningrida was cut off, so I flew in from Darwin. I was accompanied by Murray Garde, linguist, accredited translator and long-term researcher in the region, mainly because I wanted to conduct this inquiry in the vernacular and, as my Kuninjku language is limited, I needed expert assistance.

My visit followed the ministerial announcement in December 2014 that all able-bodied Aboriginal people aged 18–49 who were unemployed would be required to work for their welfare payments for five hours a day, five days a week, 52 weeks in the year. It had taken the relatively new Abbott government 15 months, and the conduct of a major employment and training review headed by mining magnate Andrew Forrest to work out that there was no mainstream labour market in almost all Aboriginal communities in remote Australia.

So the government was proposing two new strategies: one was to get people to engage in 'work-like' activities -- what anthropologist David Graeber has recently termed 'bullshit

jobs'; the other was to promote the establishment of subsidised small businesses.

Minister Scullion has since confirmed that there are insufficient jobs in remote Australia, so people will be forced into 'work-like activities'. As long as jobseekers are taking part in 25 hours a week of meaningful community activity, working for the dole in perpetuity was not a negative outcome he stated.

Minister Scullion got into a spot of bother for saying, 'Many of my communities live on the floor, it is like a cave. I think that one of the characteristics of civilisation must be that you don't have to eat at the same level as your animals, it must be something like that. I feel very strongly that we should try and provide furniture'. Contrary to the Minister, it has always been my observation that sitting on the ground, connected to the ground, is a cultural imperative.

lowers I will provide some brief translated excerpts, but will keep the identity of my interlocutors anonymous to protect them from any possible retribution.

When I asked an old friend Balang what constitutes the good life for Kuninjku, bearing in mind he is marooned in Maningrida by the wet, he said:

*"Being able to go to your country and being able to live here too, that's the good life. Sometimes going bush, sometimes living here. The main thing is to have enough food. When you have enough food to eat, that's good. I don't change my thinking, and I think about my grandparents and their country. What makes me happy is when I go back to my home out bush and I can go out hunting and I can live like the old people from olden times. That makes me happy, when I'm in my camp, I can paint, I can*

*the clinic. We can go bush but the problem is when we get sick or when we have no food out there. So it pushes us to come and live here to get food and health services, but we still want to live out bush. It's a contradiction that frustrates us!"*

Balang's reflexivity and frustration can be contrasted with the view of the current Australian government that, like so many before, is quite sure about what constitutes 'the good life' for remote living Aboriginal people.

When he was elected in September 2013, Tony Abbott promptly anointed himself the Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs. Last month he attracted considerable opprobrium for suggesting that Indigenous people who live in remote communities are making a 'lifestyle choice'. He noted in supporting a decision to defund 150 small communities in Western

built around three slogans: kids to school, adults to work and safe (policed) communities. The overarching goal of this policy is to close statistical gaps, to turn remote living Indigenous people into no-gaps neoliberal subjects. This is 'the good life'. The Australian government today proposes to 'develop the north' and simultaneously develop the remote-living Aboriginal people.

Such rhetoric is not new; the government made similar promises that failed when administering Arnhem Land 50 years ago. People like the Kuninjku experienced that failure firsthand, the intense political conflict with other Aboriginal groups and the structural violence under the trusteeship of the colonial state. As soon as they could, Kuninjku escaped and went bush.

The challenge to deliver development and citizenship services to remote Australia is



**WHOSE LIFESTYLE?** Demonstrators at Parliament House in March.

Our interviews were conducted on the ground at the same level as our friends and the camp dogs.

During an intense week, Murray and I recorded interviews with a number of Kuninjku, mainly people with whom I had worked since I had lived with them at Mumeka outstation in 1979 and 1980. In what fol-

*lowers I will provide some brief translated excerpts, but will keep the identity of my interlocutors anonymous to protect them from any possible retribution. When I asked an old friend Balang what constitutes the good life for Kuninjku, bearing in mind he is marooned in Maningrida by the wet, he said: "Being able to go to your country and being able to live here too, that's the good life. Sometimes going bush, sometimes living here. The main thing is to have enough food. When you have enough food to eat, that's good. I don't change my thinking, and I think about my grandparents and their country. What makes me happy is when I go back to my home out bush and I can go out hunting and I can live like the old people from olden times. That makes me happy, when I'm in my camp, I can paint, I can*

Australia, 'What we cannot do is endlessly subsidise lifestyle choices if those lifestyle choices are not conducive to the kind of full participation in Australian society that everyone should have'.

His government's policy framework, the Indigenous Advancement Strategy, with all its evolutionary connotations, is

enormous and should not be understated. Indigenous lands Australia-wide cover more than 2 million sq kms; there are larger communities like Maningrida at about 200 places; and about 1000 small places like Mumeka with an average 20 persons each (see map opposite). Developing these places in accord with some market capitalist logic is



# Kuninjku perspectives

replete with contradictions: remoteness, land of no or low commercial value, poor soils — this is why Aboriginal people were able to get these lands back under Land Rights and Native Title laws. They were unwanted, ‘uninvaded’ lands and generally still are, except for mineral extraction.

Nevertheless over the last two decades neoliberal triumphalism has seen a shift in policy focus from liberal multiculturalism to more and more neoliberalism and less and less multiculturalism. The developmental project of improvement was reignited in

but it remained dominated by a moral economy underpinned by kin relations. During this time Kuninjku highlight that they were assisted by their own community-based organisation, the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation. And Balandas (whites) who cared about them and supported their aspirations.

And so Kuninjku were able to engage with capitalism through their art, assisted by Maningrida Arts and Culture. Strongly represented by Bawinanga, they were also able to engage with the state to have CDEP delivered flexibly; and with the dol-

a political struggle with the Australian government. The latter saw Kuninjku returns from art plummet by 80 per cent.

Their previously strong hybrid economy declined rapidly as arts engagement with capitalism crashed, as the mediated relations with the State became strained, as Bawinanga under new management swallowed the developmental rhetoric and expanded its commercial operations to such an extent that it became insolvent, and as hunting declined with less access to vehicle and guns, in many cases due to excessive police surveil-

*made Bawinanga do what the government wanted and then they didn't want to work with us anymore. They got tired of us Bininj. They weren't interested in us anymore”.*

People are feeling abandonment acutely and are deeply concerned about the new generation stuck in Maningrida, becoming accustomed to western foods from the store and perceived, as Bangardi said, “*To lack the confidence to live on country*” -- which is contrasted with the past when, “*The old people had the true power to be self-sufficient*”.

escalating their participation and hard work in ceremonial life, fellowship and funerals.

What hope is there for the future, for the good life that for all we spoke to was something in the past?

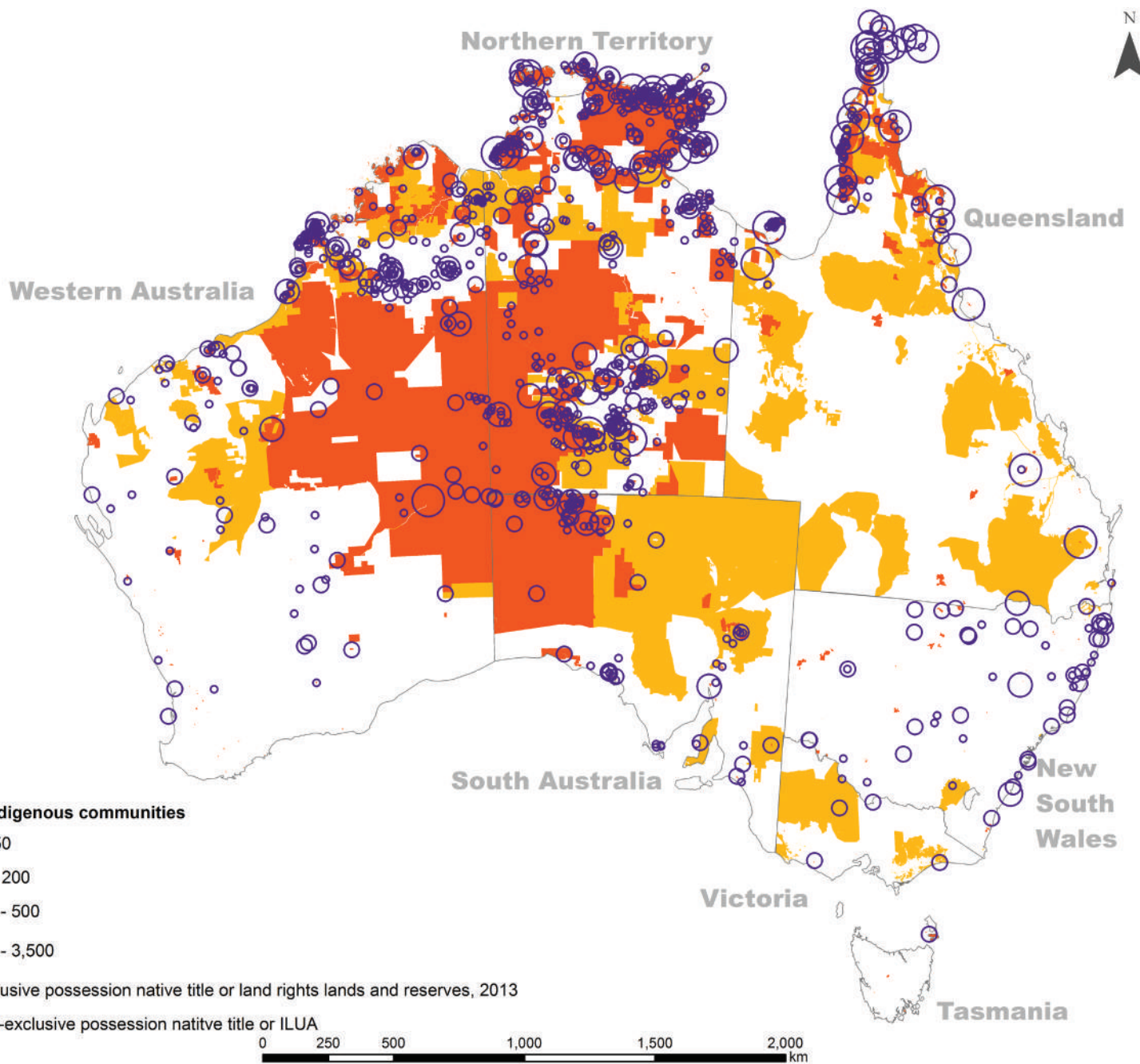
At the national level, there has been an unexpected backlash to Abbott's flippant ‘lifestyle’ comment and his support for closure of small communities, even his close adviser Warren Mundine referred to the PM's ‘foot in mouth disease’. Demonstrators at Parliament House in March had a message to the PM about his viability (see picture). His comment opened up public awareness and debate in social and print media, even in *The Australian's* editorialising: What do people do out there? Are they more costly than other Australians? Isn't habitation of remote Australia in the national interest? What are the alternatives? Aren't there strong social justice grounds to allow people to reside on their lands? And can't super rich Australia afford to support just 20,000 people at homelands? Perhaps the Australian state needs to be more creative and less destructive in its policy formulation?

When I asked another Bulanj about the future, he responded thus:

*“When we talk to each other, we say that we want to teach the young people about the country out bush, but there are too many crocodiles to take them (a Kuninjku child was tragically killed in 2012). And then they say there's no food or the kids get sick. But when we lived out there with the old people, we were fine. We want to explain the country to the young people. All the children need to learn about those places, otherwise there's a disconnection.”*

The ‘scales of justice’ have tipped away from Kuninjku since 2007 after they had moulded, with sympathetic assistance, a hybrid and moral economy after the dark days of the colonial era. Today their social justice struggles for recognition, representation and redistribution are apparently defeated as an unsympathetic Australian state imposes a new project of improvement that is as disconnected from local realities and Kuninjku aspirations as ever.

Like Balang, I find this contradiction not just deeply frustrating, but irrational; unless the settler state project in the present is the creative destruction of societies like the Kuninjku.



2007 with the NT Intervention and has gathered pace since.

For Kuninjku today the good life seems invariably to be in the past, a past that goes back to 1972 and that is but a dim memory for many younger people born since. Back then the old people led them back to the outstations and revived their hunting way of life supplemented by welfare and meagre arts earnings; the old people are revered.

Over the next 35 years this mixed economy that I term ‘hybrid’ had creatively combined customary/state/market sectors,

lars earned and those provided as transfer payments they were able to buy vehicles and guns to ramp up their hunting and live increasingly between Maningrida, where a few worked, and outstations. This interlinked hybrid form of economy and lifestyle mixed Balanda and Bininj (Aboriginal) ways creatively reconfigured to accord with their aspirations.

This economy started spiralling downwards after 2007, first with the Intervention and then with the Global Financial Crisis. The former saw Bawinanga effectively disempowered after

lance.

Kuninjku see all this very clearly, they lament the fact that today they are impoverished, barely having enough welfare for store-purchased food and are increasingly stuck in town and are unsupported in the bush. Abbott might lament the cost of delivering services to remote outstations, but in Kuninjku reality none are delivered anyway.

Kuninjku see that government policy has changed and so has their corporation: As Bulanj said, “*Why the government rules changed ... and why the government came and*

What worries people most is the constant pressure for the new generation to move to Maningrida live like Balandas and forego Kuninjku ways: as Balang says, “*The government wants us to stay here in Maningrida. They want us to come and live in houses here. They make the houses here to attract us*”.

Kuninjku are pushing back as best they can in three interlinked ways: by working hard in the arts, land management, hunting for food, in work that has some meaning for them; by maintaining a moral code of sharing with family; and by